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PolitiFact: Most Muslim countries allow churches, synagogues

By Robert Farley, Times Staff Writer
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The statement

In most Muslim countries, "We can't have a church. We're not able to build synagogues. It's forbidden."

Franklin Graham, Sunday, on ABC's *This Week*

The ruling

On ABC's *This Week*, host Christiane Amanpour held a town hall debate on whether Americans should fear Islam. Naturally, the so-called Ground Zero mosque came up. She asked the Rev. Franklin Graham about his comments after 9-11 that Islam is a "very evil and very wicked" religion, and that prompted this response:

"I understand what the Muslims want to do in America," said Graham. The push for mosques is driven by a desire to "convert as many Americans as they can to Islam," he said. "I just don't have the freedom to do this in most Muslim countries. We can't have a church. We're not able to build synagogues. It's forbidden."

We spoke to experts on religion and government in Muslim countries. The consensus: There are churches and/or synagogues in almost every Muslim country.

Ibrahim Hooper, a spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic relations, said Graham was incorrect. "There are lots of Christian churches and synagogues in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Jordan, Indonesia, Qatar, Kuwait. ... If you go to any number of so-called Muslim countries you will see thriving Christian and Jewish populations." One member of the Iranian Parliament is Jewish, Hooper noted. "The only one where you don't see it, where you can't have a Christian church or synagogue is Saudi Arabia," Hooper said.

The cities of Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia are the two holiest cities in Islam, said Akbar S. Ahmed, chair of Islamic Studies at American University. So no churches or synagogues are allowed there. He compared them to the Vatican.

Graham was speaking in the context of Muslims building mosques in order to convert people to Islam, and on that point, he is on firmer ground.

A 2007 Council on Foreign Relations "backgrounder" on religious conversion and *sharia* law said, "Conversion by Muslims to other faiths is forbidden under most interpretations of *sharia* and converts are considered apostates" sometimes regarded as treason and punishable by death. Experts told us there was an ongoing debate in Islam about this question.

In sum, we think Graham erred when he said that in most Muslim countries, "We can't have a church. We're not able to build synagogues. It's forbidden." That's demonstrably false. The construction of churches is not forbidden in most Muslim countries, only Saudi Arabia. And so, on balance, we rate Graham's comment False.

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